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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 001030

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SUBJECT: POLL SHOWS PM'S POPULARITY STEADY DESPITE ECONOMIC WORRIES

REF: 07 AMMAN 4971

AMMAN 00001030 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Ambassador David Hale
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: According to a recent opinion poll, public confidence in the government of PM Nader Al-Dahabi held steady in the first 100 days of his administration - reportedly the first time in the history of the poll that a PM has not suffered an initial drop in popularity. The depth of this accomplishment is even more impressive given concerns over the state of the economy. So far, the Dahabi government has effectively shaped public opinion - and blunted criticism - by highlighting the impact of international economic trends, maintaining the inevitability of Jordan's economic transformation, and softening the blow through a short-term economic stimulus package. According to the pollster, Jordanians will now be looking for a more comprehensive, long-term approach to protect them from further economic turbulence. As for the PM's overall popularity, it helps when your brother is director of intelligence and has not fallen into old patterns of tarnishing the government's reputation (Reftel). End Summary.

PM's Poll Numbers Steady

¶2. (U) A poll released by the University of Jordan's Center for Strategic Studies on March 18 indicated that after 100 days in office, the level of public confidence in the government of Nader Al-Dahabi has remained constant. Sixty-two percent of respondents in the nationwide poll said that they believe that the government is "capable of shouldering its responsibilities" - the exact same figure as when the government assumed office in December of 2007. According to news reports, this is the first time that a government's approval rating has not declined after its first 100 days.

¶3. (U) Supplemental numbers in the poll suggest that the public is still wary about the future, however. Only thirty-six percent of respondents said that the government is able to control rising prices. Fifty-four percent of those polled indicated that their economic situation had deteriorated in the past three years - only twelve percent said that their economic situation had improved.

¶4. (C) Mohammed al-Masri, the CSS researcher who conducted the poll, told poloff that despite the hullabaloo in the press and the general public about rising prices, the PM's confidence rating is surprisingly consistent. Saying that the "public relations campaign of the government was successful," Masri believes that the government showed political skill when it blunted the impact of rising prices

with a corresponding increase in public sector wages. In fact, he argues, the price rises may have been oversold, to the effect that people were generally relieved to find that the rise in prices was not as dramatic as they thought it would be.

Will It Last?

15. (C) Despite the positive reviews at 100 days, Masri foresees an inevitable decline in popularity as the effects of subsidy elimination are felt more broadly. He argued that hoarding of petroleum products and other supplies from the pre-inflation era, the increase in public sector wages, and the gradual ripple effect of commodity price rises have delayed the ultimate impact of the policy. Masri believes that the government still has some breathing room, but that in order to maintain its level of support, it must start work on medium to longer term solutions that will demonstrate the government's commitment to comprehensive action. If the government's policy fails to evolve and cement its gains, Masri argued, social instability could soon follow.

16. (C) Masri also raised perceptions of corruption as a variable to watch in terms of impacting the government's popularity. From previous surveys, Masri has noticed that increases in the perception of corruption in Jordan often signal a coming decrease in the government's popularity. When the economic picture darkens, Masri believes that people start to look for an explanation - either logical or otherwise. Since most Jordanians are unwilling to criticize the government's economic policies directly, even to pollsters, they cloak that criticism in vague corruption allegations, reasoning that "there must be an explanation" for their economic situation. The more the impact of price increases becomes evident to individuals, the more Masri expects questions concerning the behavior and connections of

AMMAN 00001030 002.2 OF 002

high government officials as ordinary citizens cast about for an explanation.

Comment

17. (C) Even the most cynical of our contacts recognize that the government-led economic reforms were necessary and inevitable. There is continuing concern that the poorest citizens of Jordan are slipping through the cracks, but only the Islamic Action Front (whose paltry influence affords it considerable rhetorical space without any corresponding responsibility) is calling for a return to the status quo ante of subsidies. Jordanians realize that there is no going back, but they will still expect a great deal from the government in the months to come. The PM's achievement is impressive, but the challenges remain daunting.

HALE